

CHAPTER VII

BIRTH, ADOLESCENCE, MARRIAGE

Birth—Childhood Instruction—Puberty Rites—Marriage

BIRTH

IT was impossible to obtain definite data on the fertility of Bella Coola women, or on the period elapsing between marriage and the birth of the first child. Sterility is rare, though by no means unknown; on the other hand, there are several families with as many as eight or nine children. The changed conditions which have followed the advent of the white man seem to have had little influence on the high birth-rate, although infant mortality has increased enormously. Within the last few years this has diminished, so that the Bella Coola are now holding their own. Children are always desired, and although methods of abortion and infanticide have been known for many years, neither practice seems to have been sufficiently common to have produced an appreciable effect on the population. [842] [163] [165] [847]

Pregnancy usually occurs during the year following marriage. Though its actual dependence upon coition is fully realized, yet the Bella Coola, religiously minded in this as in all other aspects of life, ascribe the condition to the *Akwamish* acting on the behalf of *Aiponim*. It is believed that the Carpenters carve out the child who is to be born in the same way that a human craftsman manufactures some complicated object. Most individuals do not theorize to any extent upon the course of biological development, but are content to assume that *Aiponim* has made the coming birth possible. [843] [776] [773]

During pregnancy the expectant mother must observe certain restrictions. If she chews gum, she will have a difficult delivery; if she eats salmon tails, the feet of the infant will appear before the head, and although skilled assistants can usually rotate a child, this is a painful process which should [845] [825]

843 be avoided. If she walks on a beaver dam, or dips her head
825 into a pool made by this animal, the birth of her infant will
be blocked in the same way that the dam restrains a stream.
This difficulty can be obviated, however, by dipping up the
water with her hands instead of bending her head to the surface
to drink. As far as possible, she must avoid being startled by
[774] small animals or reptiles; even if the excitement so caused is
too slight to expel her own spirit, it may be sufficient to damage
that of the foetus. Such dangers can be countered by means
of magical rites (I, p. 750). Her husband is also subject to
certain injunctions and prohibitions. If he eats beaver meat
his wife's delivery will be difficult. He must preserve a small
piece of the skin or an eye of every animal that he kills; a few
[842] days after birth the child is steeped in the smoke of a fire on
which these articles have been thrown. This prevents injury
from the father's quarry.²

A pregnant woman continues to reside in her own house,
where her condition is a source of interest to her friends and
relatives. There are no midwives with inheritable professional
844 prerogatives, but as the time for delivery draws near, arrange-
[424] ments are made for the mother or some other experienced
female relative to be in attendance. It is quite proper for the
husband to attend to this point, though it is customary for
elderly female relatives to do so, sometimes those of the wife,
sometimes those of her husband. A woman who, having herself
borne children, has assisted at many births with success, is
often requested to be present, and it is taken as a matter of
course that she will be rewarded for her services.

When the pains of labour begin, the patient leaves the house
with her assistant or assistants. In summer the party goes to
some lonely spot in the woods where a rude wind-break may
have been erected; in winter, to a sheltered spot beneath a
house. No man can be present, a point in which the Bella
[77] Coola state that their culture differs from that of the Kwakwaka.
The midwife manipulates the infant so that the birth is made

²The rite is described in detail below (I, p. 750).

RELATIONS WITH THE SUPERNATURAL

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served ceremonial chastity and was, therefore, in a good position to receive premonitions of this kind. The next day, as they were paddling down the river, they came upon some treacherous ice. Forewarned, they hastily abandoned their canoe, one side of which was soon broken in the way *Tsälits* had described; if they had continued their journey they would certainly have been drowned.

The dreams thus far recorded have all been capable of simple explanation; in fact, their meaning is obvious, either visually or audibly. In addition, there are a number of types considered to be symbolic by the Bella Coola. There are no professional interpreters, but it is believed that in ancient times shamans learnt the significance of certain images and this knowledge has since been transmitted from generation to generation.

One type indicates a coming birth. If a woman dreams that she travels to some distant spot, under the ocean or into the mountains, and there takes something in her hand, it signifies that she will soon bear a male child; on the other hand, if she picks up some small object when gathering berries, a daughter will be born. A Kimsquit informant stated that before his birth, his mother dreamt that she had gone far under the mouth of the Dean River to the vicinity of *Lomogwa's* house, where she had taken up a child. From this she knew she was pregnant and he was born in due course. If the scene of the dream is in the mountains, it means that the child will be a good hunter; if under water, that he will be a successful fisherman, as it proved in this case. There is a vague belief that death takes place either near the spot where the mother received indication of conception, or that the life and spirit of the deceased visit the place before setting out on their journey back from generation to generation. The old man from whom this information was obtained expects to meet death by drowning, though he is himself uncertain whether his premonition is due to his mother's dream or to the fact that there has been a tendency for this to occur in his family.

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* 787 If a woman dreams that she has caught two salmon, two
 ● 843 small birds, or is holding two infants, the birth of twins is
 foretold. This type of explanation is obvious; in fact, these
 examples lie on the border-line between direct and symbolic
 interpretations.

* 787 Another indication of approaching pregnancy is for a
 843 woman to dream of a dead relative; this means that the latter
 775 will soon be re-born. An elderly Kimsquit man mentioned
 that some fifty years earlier his mother dreamt that her dead
 mother came to her, saying that she was lonesome and wished
 to return. Soon afterwards she conceived, and the daughter
 born was considered to be the reincarnation of her own grand-
 [53] mother whose names she was promptly given. At the present
 time, this informant addresses his sister as sister, though he
 states that as a child he was taught to call her grandmother.
 As already mentioned, if a new-born infant is a reincarnation,
 the fact can often be recognized by holes or dimples in the
 ears, relics of previous borings for rings. Unless such a birth
 has been foretold in a dream, it is impossible to learn whom
 the child re-embodies.

* 787 A dream of frequent occurrence in Bella Coola is the return
 of the sleeper to the scenes and activities of his childhood.
 [76] This always signifies a long life. Strangely enough, to dream
 of being nailed in one's coffin and carried to the grave is trans-
 lated conversely, and likewise indicates a long life. It is re-
 [73] membered that there were many dreams of fire before the
 outbreak of the smallpox epidemic, so it has since been assumed
 that such presage an outbreak of this disease.

* 787 The only dreams of which the interpretations are wholly
 224 symbolic are those experienced by hunters. The Bella Coola
 [785] explain this by saying that hunters always observe ceremonial
 chastity and their spirits are, therefore, in a receptive condi-
 tion to supernatural impressions. When a man has set his
 traps, he is able to tell from his dreams whether or not any
 animals have been caught:

To dream that a canoe has been upset in the river and that

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Kill a squirrel, clean it, wash the entrails carefully and leave them hanging in the sun to dry for four days, then tie them around the child's stomach for four days more. It is important that the infant should not break the string. On the fourth day, remove them and hang them in the doorway of the house. On this same day, another squirrel must be killed, treated as before, and its viscera allowed to dry for four days. The child wears these in the same way for four days, when they too are hung in the doorway. A third squirrel, and finally a fourth, is killed and made use of in precisely the same manner. When the final set of entrails has been hung up, the four are left suspended for four days, till the twenty-eighth after the killing of the first animal, when the father takes them to the forest and deposits them beneath some projecting rock where no water can penetrate and where they will dry and keep indefinitely.

This causes the child to grow up endowed, like the squirrel, with agility so that he can scale even precipitous mountains. This medicine is frequently used in conjunction with one for hunting ability.

To Cause Easy Delivery

Place the foetus of a porcupine against the back of a girl's neck and allow it to drop to the ground. Pick it up, replace it, and let it fall again. This is repeated four times while the person says:

"Please, may she be like you and have no trouble in giving birth."

This medicine can be used at any time before puberty.

To Cause Bravery (four means)

(1) When a grizzly bear has been shot, a lad who wishes to make himself brave approaches it and thrusts his arm down the dying animal's throat. This kills it by choking. Then he rubs his hand over his heart and the back of his neck, the seat

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To Cause Birth of a Child of the Desired Sex

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If a boy is desired: The pregnant woman must have prepared for her a miniature bow and arrows on which she sleeps for four nights and then throws into the fire.

If a girl is desired: The pregnant woman must have prepared for her miniature tools used for beating cedar-bark on which she sleeps for four nights and then throws into the fire.

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To Cause Easy Delivery (two means)

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(1) The pregnant woman must boil stalks of stonecrop in water and drink freely of the decoction.

(2) A variant of the medicine already described can be applied during pregnancy. Strike the back of the woman with one or more porcupine embryos. The thrower must remain in concealment and the woman to be benefited must be unaware of what is about to be done.

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To Cause Increased Flow of Milk

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Heat pods of *Sedum Spathulifolium* (Hook) and apply them as a poultice to the breasts of the nursing mother.

MISCELLANEOUS MEDICINES USED BY ADULTS

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To Cause Energy

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Take the paw of a freshly killed beaver in one hand and pat it with the other, saying:

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"Please, may I be like you."

This ensures that the man or woman will always work hard, like a beaver.

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To Cause Long Life

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Pick up a toad, spit on it four times, saying:

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"May I be strong like you," and put it down carefully.

The basis of this medicine is the belief that toads are capable of resisting greater pressure than other animals. For example, if one is caught in an olachen net, it survives the crushing weight of fish and water and is alive when the net is emptied, though all other living animals so enmeshed are killed.

PREVENTIVE AND CURATIVE MEDICINES

MEDICINES OF INFANCY AND CHILDHOOD

789 *To Counteract Dangers Incurred During Pregnancy* (two means)

774 (1) As already described (I, p. 96), there is always danger of
 843 a person losing his spirit through a sudden start, causing invol-
 825 untary contraction of the muscles, but pregnant women are
 especially liable to peril of this kind. Moreover, the unex-
 pected appearance of a toad, rat, or mouse, though insufficient
 to harm an expectant mother, may suffice to startle the unborn
 child, or even to destroy his spirit. A woman carefully remem-
 bers all experiences of this kind and treats the injury while her
 infant is crying immediately after birth. If a toad has caused
 it, she catches one, decorates it with dyed cedar-bark, and
 places it on the child's stomach, then guides it so that it
 jumps up the chest to the neck. This is repeated four times.
 She then sets it down, unharmed on the ground, saying:

"You are the cause of the trouble, please go."

The same rite is carried out for all small mammals, reptiles,
 and even with birds which have startled a mother by their
 peculiar behaviour. In some families it is customary to post-
 [846] pone the application of this medicine until four days after
 birth. There is considerable difference of opinion concerning
 the specific injury; some allege that the spirit of the creature
 enters the body and, if not counteracted, causes the child to
 be born sick and feeble.

843 (2) During his wife's pregnancy, a husband must preserve
 825 a small portion of the skin of every animal killed. Four days
 789 after birth, as the infant lies in its cradle, a small fire is built
 [846] beneath and the pieces thrown thereon so that the child is
 [761] steeped in the smoke. If this is neglected, the boy or girl will
 [774] die during infancy, though the means by which the slain ani-
 mals accomplish this is not fully understood. Possibly, as in
 the last instance, their spirits have entered the body. Some
 hunters preserve an eye from every carcass instead of a piece

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of fur. Even at the present time, the death of a new-born child is usually attributed to omission of this precaution.

A Kimsquit man mentioned that he had once shot a marten during his wife's pregnancy, and had failed to preserve a piece of the skin. The bullet had passed through the head, making a hole in the cheek-bone beneath the eye. He thought no more of the incident until after the birth of a daughter with a blemish on her cheek in the same place as the wound on the marten's. The spot grew bigger, and the flesh began to mortify until the infant died a few weeks later. Her face resembled that of the animal and he is convinced that his loss was caused, in some way, by the marten.

To Cure Indigestion

Kill a raven, cut out a morsel of flesh from beneath its left wing, and then remove the heart. Place both in the infant's mouth and leave them there until wet with saliva. Replace them in the bird's body and tie a strip of dyed cedar-bark around its neck. Carry the carcass to some lonely spot in the mountains and hide it beneath a jutting rock where no water can penetrate. This cures the child. If, however, anyone should find the raven's body before the flesh has decayed, the patient would die.

This remedy, widely employed for small children, was used with success by an informant for his young daughter. It is not sufficiently potent for adults.

To Cure Crying

The Bella Coola consider that crying is not only unpleasant, but actively displeasing to the supernatural beings who permit it at death alone. Consequently, the persistent wailing of a child is likely to cause the death of a relative in order that the tears shed may have justification. Many stories illustrate this theme; in fact, to cry for no real reason is practically taboo. A mother quiets a fretting child by saying:

"Do you want your father and me to die?"